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VIRGINIA RELEASES REPORT AS PART OF NATIONAL PROGRAM TO HELP REDUCE VIOLENT DEATHS

(RICHMOND, Va.)—When watching reports about violent deaths on the evening news, you may think the greatest threat for a violent death is from homicide. A report to be issued on Wednesday by the Virginia Department of Health's (VDH) Office of the Chief Medical Examiner shows that the higher risk of violent death is from suicide.

The Virginia edition of the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) found that of 1,332 violent deaths in Virginia for 2003, 60 percent were suicides while 33 percent were homicides. One percent of the violent deaths in Virginia were the result of unintentional firearm injury.

Virginia was one of the six states initially selected to participate in a five-year pilot program for NVDRS, a national effort funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which looks at deaths due to homicide, suicide, unintentional firearm injury, legal interventions and terrorism. Since its inception, the program has now expanded to include 17 states.

This is the first year that Virginia will publish its NVDRS report, aimed at providing information about Virginia's violent deaths and assisting injury and prevention partners to develop effective programs to reduce the number of violent deaths. NVDRS combines death information from several sources, particularly forensic pathology, forensic science, vital records and law enforcement.

"Because this system provides specific information about each death and increases our understanding of suicides, VDH and our partners can develop interventions to reduce suicides in the Commonwealth and can be more effective in our outreach to those most prone to suicide," said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H.

The Virginia report, to be published Oct. 12 analyzes the nearly 800 suicides in the Commonwealth during 2003 to determine what risk factors may be present. The report also found:

- Three out of four violent deaths were males.
- For overall violent deaths, blacks were disproportionately more at risk than whites or Hispanics. However whites were more at risk than other groups for suicide, while blacks were more at risk for homicide.

(more)

- Violent death rates were highest in central Virginia and lowest in the northern region of the state. Richmond City had the highest number of violent deaths in the state.
- Suicide rates were highest among males over age 65 and especially high among males 85 and older.
- One in four suicide victims were veterans of the armed forces.

“This report is a powerful tool to assist in reducing premature death due to violence,” said Marcella Fierro, M.D., Virginia’s chief medical examiner. “My hope is that we can begin to understand the despair and hopelessness of those who take their own life and to take constructive steps to prevent future suicides.”

The profile of Virginians who commit suicide provides insight into ways others might be able to intervene. Among those who committed suicide in 2003:

- 39 percent were receiving mental health treatment at the time of their death
- 24 percent had disclosed their intent to commit suicide to someone else

VDH will use this data to target additional suicide prevention campaigns and will work with other suicide prevention partners to reach out to at-risk groups identified in this report. For more information about NVDRS, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov.

Editor’s note: To read the full report, go to <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/news/index.asp>.

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